

Can it muddle through?

Some thoughts on future scenarios for Afghanistan



DR. SIEGFRIED
O. WOLF

EVERYTHING BOILS

DOWN TO ONE CORE QUESTION: WILL THE AFGHAN GOVERNMENT BE ABLE TO STABILISE THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OR WILL THE COUNTRY ONCE AGAIN FALL INTO THE TRAP OF YET ANOTHER CIVIL WAR?

After 11 years of intervention by the US/NATO in Afghanistan helping to create a stable and prosperous country, the socio-political and economic future for the Afghans still remains a conundrum. The aim here, however is not to predict one, two or even more certain, self-fulfilling future scenarios. It is also not an attempt to lay out where Afghanistan should go. The goal of this article is to share ideas about visions for the country's and its people's future. Today, there are several indications that everything boils down to one core question: Will the Afghan government be able to stabilise the political landscape or will the country once again fall into the trap of yet another civil war? Having this in mind, three scenarios could evolve: A 'muddling through' scenario of the current and successive governments, a coup scenario and a civil war scenario. Actually it is likely that the coup scenario will lead to a civil war situation in the middle or long term perspective. It is nevertheless worth examining each of these different potential outcomes separately.

For the 'muddling through' scenario, following conditions must be fulfilled. First, this scenario can only be deemed realistic if there is a certain sense of conviction among all Afghan actors involved that the last three decades of armed conflict were self-destructive. Building on the notion that continuing down this path of wasting resources and diminishing indigenous power would lead to a weakening of the position of several factions in their respective regional strongholds, is of paramount importance to the "muddling through" case. In order to preserve the sentiment of "wasteful fighting", it is of utmost importance to find clear and acceptable mechanisms of granting access to central political decision-making processes as well as the distribution of national resources.

A second crucial condition is accepting that the Taliban movement will have to be allowed to play a role in the Afghan state and society. The acknowledgement of these conditions by the new National Front of Afghanistan (NF, formed at the end of 2011 to politically oppose President Hamid Karzai) as well as the assent of numerous local militias-set up by the US/NATO,

instructed to fight the Taliban is the precursor of establishing the foundation for the "muddling through" scenario. The 'Berlin statement' in January 2012 of the three founders of the NF, 'former' warlords Ahmad Zia Massud (Tajik, Jamiat-e Islami), General Abdul Rashid Dostum (Uzbek, Jombesh party) and Muhammad Muhaqqui (Hazara, Hezb-e Wahdat), stating that in principle they could conceive of leading negotiations with the Taliban as long as the NF would be included in the talks, might be an indication of the possibility of an arrangement. If the NF continues to feel excluded from the 'Taliban dialogue', the absence of large scale armed confrontations as a main characteristic of this scenario will not be guaranteed.

The acceptance of the 'Taliban presence' could basically appear in a formal or informal power-sharing arrangement. Formal power sharing aims to make a legitimate political participation for the Taliban possible, like allowing official representatives such as political groups to take part in the country's politics. But a 'too generous' concession which would integrate the Taliban immediately into the institutional structure of the country's political-administrative system, for example in form of quotas or reserved domains, would overstretch the incentive/will for rapprochement of the former and current combatants of the Taliban. Furthermore, it is hard to envision how the Taliban would fit into the current Realpolitik of Kabul's clientelistic and corrupt policy making and implementation without undermining the Taliban's own ideological principals. Nevertheless, in order to implement a formal integration of the Taliban, they have to abandon the notion of regaining total power (re-establishing their Islamic Emirate), accept the constitution, i.e. distancing themselves from radical visions of organising social and public life, as well as seriously integrate themselves into a growing vibrant and pluralistic civil society. Their detachment from Al-Qaida, of course is another essential criteria. However, the ongoing massive human rights violations, especially the violence against women, in currently Taliban-controlled areas (which the Taliban most likely will still hold after a formal arrangement), indicates that they are not inter-

ested in giving up their extremist worldviews. However, all kinds of formal arrangements remain highly fragile since it will be difficult to balance the ambitions for power as well as control the deep anger among the different factions. Therefore, the Taliban's acceptance of a certain level of US troops in the country, to ensure minimum security for the central government and its institutions, is crucial which of course counts for all other Afghan parties as well.

In contrast, an informal power-sharing agreement seems to be more realistic. The Taliban leadership has become convinced that they will not be able to re-capture Kabul and other urban centres due to the continuing US

the last Taliban regime (1996-2001).

However, regardless of the kind of agreement which will be achieved, there is the constant threat that some Taliban groups will not be eager to drop their swords and pick up ploughshares. Even if they cannot win, they will at least try to destabilise the central government and as many provinces or districts as possible. Therefore, the successful re-formation of (former) anti-Taliban groups of the Hazaras, Uzbeks, and Tajiks as well as the militias will keep a close eye on the Pashtun-dominated Taliban. But they will not only try to keep them in check in order to protect their resources, some will go further and seek excuses for revenge. In other words, the

ple or at least 'freeze' their multi-layered and complex bilateral and triangular conflict constellations for the sake of a fruitful exchange of views. In this direction, the 'composite dialogue' between India and Pakistan could serve as a model, and all participating countries could be convinced of the merits of cooperation. New Delhi and Islamabad agreed to broaden the single-issue-oriented bilateralism which was centered on the Kashmir stalemate. But most importantly, this process has to be facilitated by and within the region to gain credibility. Therefore, mediation from outside the region might be more a roadblock than a catalyst for change, at least at the initial stage. If needed and demanded and based

exercising purely symbolic power.

On the other hand, the Afghan state could appear with a 'sufficient enough' government with relatively functional institutions, enabling the executive to juggle the different regional power centres in order to balance the interests between central and regional as well as between the regional centres themselves. In other words, the government would be able to influence and control the political decision-making processes. Last but not least, one should mention that in both scenarios, elections do not play a significant role for political elite recruitment, because regional and ethnic ties will lead to an electoral behavior characterized by so-called vote banks, representing the respective realm of influences of the power centers.

The coup situation more or less resembles a hybrid situation of the 'muddling-through' and civil war scenarios. Basically there will be a permanent threat of a coup d'état, which is not an unknown phenomenon in Afghanistan. The country already experienced a couple of military-led or backed or enforced regime changes in the last six decades. The most crucial ones were the ousting of King Zahir Shar in 1973 by Doud Khan or the killing of Khan later on by revolting officers in 1978 (Saur Revolution), leading to the installation of the first communist government in the country. Several critical junctures can be identified which could create the momentum for such coups: First, if the civilian government is not able to achieve or keep the ethnic balance within the Afghan National Army and meanwhile, one ethnic group like the Tajiks or Pashtuns gains an upper hand in the officers corps and/or rank and file. Second, if the government is forced to significantly reduce troop levels due to insufficient financial resources.

Third, the remaining US troops fail to monitor and intervene in Afghan power struggles in order to protect the government. Fourth, if there is a deterioration in military internal cohesion, parts of the military will stand up against the government, and eventually gain support by outside forces as happened during the Saur revolution. Fifth, if President Hamid Karzai is able to lift the ban on running for a third term and

remain in office after 2014 through (extra-) constitutional engineering. This last factor will gain particular momentum if widespread irregularities during the next presidential election appear, diminishing the chances for the potential candidate of the National Front of Afghanistan.

There is no doubt that a coup would be a significant game changer in the complex and fragile balance of power in the country, either disturbing or re-establishing it. However, despite the fact that there might be a slight, modicum of hope that all major actors will accept an enforced regime change, due to their respective own disagreements with the national government, they will not accept the dominance of one certain faction or coalition in the country. In consequence, the coup will lead to the abyss of civil war again.

Although a muddling-scenario of the Afghan government is far from being a best case scenario, the fall into the abyss of civil war is doubtless the worst case scenario. It will not only lead to a collapse of the national government and its institutional structure; but would mark a return to the large-scale armed confrontation between the different Mujahideen factions of the pre-Taliban area. In this context, one has to state that the civil war during these days was perhaps suspended but never really settled, neither by the Taliban nor by the multinational International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) or the US-led coalition force. But in case of resuming the war, it will be of a much higher intensity due to more combatants, guns and resources, and there will be more actors which have much more to lose than ever before. However, today it seems that the calculated optimism of the international community regarding a muddling-through scenario in Afghanistan with its complex challenges still offers some justified hope that in the end, things will work out. Nevertheless one should not ignore that Afghanistan is in a state of flux, unfortunately not necessarily heading towards a peaceful future.

The writer is a lecturer of Political Science and International Relations as well as a senior research fellow in the Department of Political Science, South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University



military presence (and other, smaller NATO contingents), the rising strength of 'contracted' local militias, and loyal Afghan Security Forces (which have been able to maintain internal cohesion and a clear chain of command) beyond 2014. The Taliban will, however, take control over certain rural areas, establishing their own regional administration, but will not try to extend their influence over the borders of certain, negotiated areas. In return, the government and the militias will tolerate Taliban dominance in the respective regions in order to maintain territorial integrity of the state and to avoid civil war. But one has to be aware that such a form of power-sharing determines a dramatic set-back for the development of a free civil society. In fact, for the people in the affected areas, it will be a return to square one, meaning a 'quasi-comeback' of the conditions under

fighting will most likely continue with varying intensity.

Third, countries in the direct as well as extended neighbourhood will play a constructive role in achieving a stable and sustainable balance of power between all Afghan factions which must be seen as the key for peace. The three-way summit between Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan, which occurred in February 2012, could have the potential to serve as a platform to build trust, coordinate interests as well as ensure Afghanistan's sovereignty. As a main building block towards comprehensive regional interlocations, this trilateral dialogue could be broadened in a second step, including India and China. In a third round, Russia and the Central Asian Republics, namely Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, could add their contributions for sustainable negotiations. However, it is obvious that these nations must set-

upon a regional consensus, the states of the European Union (EU) and ASEAN should showcase their expeditious experiences in enhancing regional cooperation.

In consequence, if the above-mentioned determinants would work in favour of national reconciliation, the 'muddling-through' scenario of the Afghan state might appear in two variations: On the one hand, as a state with a pro forma central administration just for the sake of having a national government. Officially Kabul obtains full control over the state of affairs, as outlined in a more or less insignificant constitution. But regarding the reality on the ground the government would primarily represent the state outwards in order 'to keep the aid flowing'. Regarding inwards, the administration would only perform ceremonially with minimal domestic functions,